



RUTHVEN'S WARD

BY
FLORENCE MARRIAT.

CHAPTER IV.

POMONA VILLA, situated in its own park-like grounds on the borders of Blackheath, was a select seminary for young ladies, conducted by the Misses Prism. The 'park-like grounds' consisted altogether of about half an

acre of the terrestrial sphere, the chief part of which was laid down with shingle, affording an excellent opportunity of research for such pupils as were studying geology. As this fact was found, however, on discovery, to depress the spirits of parents, and cause them to imagine they might be deceived in other particulars as well as the grounds, the Misses Prism always hastened to correct the erroneous impression by assuring their would-be patrons that they only received young ladies of the highest families, and from the most select circles of society.

The Misses Prism forgot to mention, whilst alluding to this part of the subject, that Miss Jane Prime, of the first class, was the eldest daughter of the gentleman who provided them with beef, and that he had been gradually induced, as the young lady advanced in years, to increase his deduction from the weekly butcher's bills, from one pound to thirty shillings. It would also, doubtless, have been wasting the time of their visitors to explain that the reason the two Misses Candy were numbered amongst the select, was, that their papa was the principal grocer in the town, or that the two Misses Waters represented a certain number of quarts of milk, and that, to make a long story short, they accepted any pupils they could get, without the slightest reference to their ancestors or antecedents.

The seminary at Pomona Villa was conducted on precisely the same principles as the generality of its kind, and turned out as finished women, with some few exceptions. This was the boarding-school to which Ruthven decided to send Margaret O'Reilly. In his dilemma, he had gone, naturally enough, to a married lady friend, the wife of one of his sons comrades; a woman who had no children of her own, but had heard of the Misses Prism through some one else, and Ruthven seized on the first opportunity presented to him, and made all the arrangements for the reception of his protegee at Pomona Villa, through the penny-post. He wrote frankly that her education had been neglected; but that was no drawback in the eyes of the Misses Prism. "They would give all the more attention to the sweet child, that she might realize every hope her excellent guardian entertained for her."

Ruthven winced under the correspondence, but considered that a few years with the Misses Prism could do the girl no harm.

"As soon as she can read and write," he thought, "I shall put her under Mrs. Delamaine, who'll make an excellent little chambermaid of her, or train her for any other line she may prove able to fill. I can't hear of her going into burlesque or the ballet with that face. It's quite enough responsibility for me to have picked her out of the gutter without incurring more. I often think I've done a hair-brained thing; but I'm in for it now, and the only course to take is to go through it as creditably as I can. So first to close with Miss Prism."

Both Ruthven and Mrs. Garrett had anticipated some difficulty when they told Peg she was to go to school, but to their astonishment the girl evinced the greatest delight at the prospect.

"Oh! I am glad," she ejaculated; "it is real good of Mr. Ruthven to send me to get some learning. I want to be a lady so much, and read all the books Master Hamilton does, and do beautiful writing like he can."

"Lor' bless the gal!" exclaimed the irate housekeeper, "you don't go to suppose that reading and writing will make you a lady? You'll never be a lady, live as long as you may, so the sooner you get that notion out of your head the better."

"Shan't I never?" said Peg, in a tone of disappointment, clasping her little thin hands together; "not if I tries very hard? Why, I heard Mr. Ruthven say

the other day 'twas drawing, painting, music and such things that made people ladies and gentlemen, and I thought if I learned them at school I might be a lady, too."

"Well, I know nothing of what Mr. James said; but you can't be a lady unless you were born to it, and that's a settled fact. But why don't you call him 'master,' instead of Mr. Ruthven? 'Twould be much more suitable in my ideas, for a young gal like you."

"Never mind that, Garrett," exclaimed Ruthven, who had overheard this conversation; "I would rather Margaret continued to call me 'Mr. Ruthven.' It will make things less awkward when she goes to school."

"Just as you please, sir," responded the housekeeper; but from the way in which she grumbled over her work afterward, it did not seem as though, in this instance, his pleasure was her own.

Meanwhile, Peg O'Reilly's feelings at the contemplated change in her life were very mixed. This poor child, who had been reared in a work-house, made the drudge of a grocer's wife, and as a walf of the streets, had yet preserved amidst all her wanderings an instinctive knowledge that she was capable of better things.

With the face and form of a child of ten years old, she had the prematurely forced mind of a woman twice that age, which began to show itself as soon as ever it was placed in a congenial atmosphere. Her first feelings, when Ruthven carried her off so unceremoniously to his house, had been those of fear and curiosity; but she had fallen into the customs and manners of civilized life so naturally, as almost to incline one to believe it could not be her first introduction to them.

Her conversations with the housekeeper had imbued her with a terrible shame of her past life, whilst those with Hamilton Shore had given her a thirst to raise herself above even its recollections. But beyond all this, as her mind awakened to a consciousness of the utter want of claim she had upon Ruthven's benevolence and generosity, came the deep, heartfelt gratitude which she never ceased to entertain for him. She was very shy still with her patron, and totally powerless to express her feelings toward him. But if ever a girl believed a man to be more than mortal, Peg O'Reilly, in her silent adoration, credited James Ruthven with that attribute. She was sadly disappointed when Mrs. Garrett affirmed she would never be a lady; but she had heard what Lake Addison said to his friend on the subject, and she determined she would try to be one, for Ruthven's sake.

There was a great lamentation on the part of Hamilton Shore when he found that he and Peg were so soon to be separated, and he derived no consolation whatever from Mrs. Garrett telling him that so long as his bed was properly made and his supper ready when he required it, "it could make no possible difference to him, who came into the house and went out of it." Ruthven parted with his protegee in the same unceremonious manner in which he had adopted her. He nodded his head to her in passing, put a sovereign into her hand, and told her to be a good child and learn all she could, and got into his cab and drove away.

Mrs. Garrett, according to instructions, conducted the girl to Blackheath, and delivered her over to the charge of the Misses Prism. Once happily freed from the kisses which the preceptresses lavished on her as long as Mrs. Garrett was in sight, Peg felt dreadfully shy on being introduced to the bevy of young ladies in the school-room, until she discovered that the Misses Waters, Candy, and Prime spoke as ungrammatically as she did herself, and that, thanks to the liberality of her guardian (as Ruthven had desired her to call him), she was as well dressed as any girl there.

Indeed, until the neat black leather trunk with brass nails, which had accompanied her to Pomona Villa, was unpacked, Peg had no idea of the wealth of which she was the possessor. The young ladies of the highest families were all witnesses to its disembowelment, and as the handkerchiefs, scarfs, ribbons, collars and such like easily transferable wares, came to the surface, the affection of her new companions developed itself as though by magic. One girl in particular, a tall, handsome creature of fourteen years of age, whose black eyes and hair and olive complexion proclaimed her to be not all of Saxon blood, was vehement both in the praises of the wardrobe and its owner.

"Stand one one side, girls, and don't push so," said she, authoritatively. "Miss O'Reilly is going to be my friend;

we were to sleep in the same room, and Miss Prism has put her under my especial care, so I won't see her put upon in any way."

"Which means that she intends to get that scarlet ribbon she is fingering for herself," grumbled one of the select; "it's just like Carmen Flowers—to pounce upon every good thing that comes into the school."

"Greedy!" said Miss Candy.

"Vain!" sneered Miss Prime.

"Stuck up!" chimed in Miss Waters. By which it may be seen that Carmen Flower—Spanish by her mother's side, and English by her father's—although she was strongly suspected of turning out a beauty, was not much of a favorite at Pomona Villa.

Whether on account of Ruthven's liberality, however, or because some secret attraction drew the two girls together, Carmen Flower and Margaret O'Reilly were fast friends from the first day of meeting. On Peg's side a vast deal of admiration mingled with the affection she conceived for her new companion.

Carmen was only one year older than herself; yet she appeared almost a woman by comparison with her, and Peg thought she had never seen anything more beautiful than her flashing black eyes, and long, straight limbs, and the abundant dark tresses with which her head was crowned. Carmen was an orphan, too, who could not remember either father or mother, and lived with her uncle and guardian, Sir Frederic Flower, in an old house in the country called Abbotsville. It was rumored in the school that Miss Flower was an heiress, and would inherit all her uncle's money, and Carmen was fond of boasting to the same effect; but that circumstance made no difference to Peg. Her heart had known too little of affection not to respond eagerly to that semblance of it which school girls exhibit toward each other, and which has its outlet in kisses, secrets and terms of endearment. She mistook all this gilt for gold, and before a month was over her head she adored Carmen Flower as a being of superior order to herself, and was never so happy as when she was running her errands, doing her commissions, or waiting on her pleasure.

Carmen liked this adulation; it was as balm to her conceited spirit, and if she had ever felt an attachment to anyone it was to Margaret O'Reilly. Inheriting from her Spanish mother a haughtiness and thirst for admiration which had rendered her obnoxious to her companions, her beauty and wealth had not met hitherto with the consideration she thought they deserved. The British girl is almost as ready as her brother to put down anything like self-assurance and conceit, and the butcher's and baker's daughters had been irritated rather than awed, by the assumption of importance maintained by Miss Flower.

But poor Peg had no dignity of her own to keep up. She could not assert loudly, like the Misses Prime and Candy, that she was as good as others; she was only anxious to conceal the past, and let it die in silence. Even to her friend, Carmen Flower, she said nothing on the subject. Her feminine instinct had already taught her that the confession would do her harm, added to which Mrs. Garrett had especially cautioned her, on her master's behalf, not to reveal anything of her past life.

So all that the young ladies discovered was that she was an orphan and lived with her guardian, the same as Carmen Flower did. They thought her dreadfully vulgar at first, but natural timidity made her expose her deficiencies as little as possible, and natural intelligence quickly taught her to remedy them. It was Easter when she was sent to Pomona Villa, and by midsummer no one would have recognized her as the same girl. Her face and figure had filled out, her cheeks bloomed with health, and her language was at least as correct as it is with most of her age. In fact, Margaret O'Reilly had become the prettiest girl in the school, and, though their attachment continued unabated, Carmen Flower was more than disposed to be jealous of the attention she attracted. When Mrs. Garrett arrived on one of her monthly visits to see how the girl was progressing, she held up her hands in amazement.

"Lor' bless me, Miss Margaret, I never did see such a change! Well, Blackheath must agree with you, and these ladies must be doing their duty for you to look so well. I should think you must weigh double what you did when you came here."

But it was nothing more than fresh air and wholesome food and the absence of fear that had wrought the miracle. For the first time in her life Peg's little mind and body were having fair play, and they responded gratefully to it. It was a great disappointment to the girl when the midsummer holidays arrived to find that she was to spend them at Pomona Villa, in company with Miss Tarbrush, whose parents lived in Calcutta. But so it had been arranged by Ruthven from the beginning.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

If Satan ever laughs it must be at the hypocrites, they are the greatest duper he has.

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